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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides an introduction to the study circle, which features informal, face-to-face, sustained small-group discussion of social and political issues. Section 2 discusses how study circles integrate life and learning. Section 3 focuses on the significance of the study circle idea--bringing citizens back to political life. Study circle origins are described in Section 4. Section 5 lists essential characteristics of study circles. Section 6 considers who might be interested in study circles. In section 7, the content and process of the study circle are addressed. These elements of the process are discussed: organizer, leader, participants, continuity of sessions, and reading material. Section 8 makes suggestions for starting a study circle in an organization or community. An appendix lists resources available from the Study Circles Resource Center. (YLB)

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An Introduction to Study Circles

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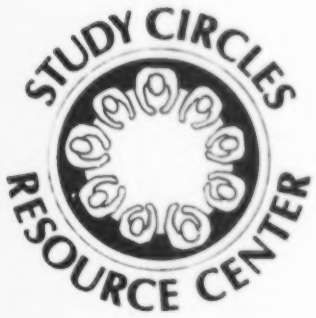

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AN INTRODUCTION TO

STUDY CIRCLES

Study Circles Resource Center

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THE STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER

The goal of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is to make study circles a standard form of citizen education in the United States. By promoting the use of these short, democratic, participatory discussion courses on social and political issues, SCRC hopes to contribute to a more enlightened, involved citizenry capable of making decisions based on informed judgement.

The Study Circles Resource Center offers a range of services designed to foster the use of study circles and to encourage organizations and communities to create their own study circle programs. SCRC can provide information on existing study circle course material, assist in developing new reading material for study circles, and provide detailed guidelines for study circle organizers and leaders. A variety of written materials are available. Please contact us if we can be of assistance.

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" . . . Man is a political animal, . . . participation in political decisions is necessary to his fulfillment and happiness, . . . all men can and must be sufficiently educated and informed to take part in making these decisions, . . . a society must make positive provisions for its development into a community learning together; for this is what political participation, government by consent, and the civilization of the dialogue all add up to."

Robert Maynard Hutchins
American Educator
1959

"The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

Robert Maynard Hutchins, 1954

1. Introduction: The Study Circle Idea

Americans are being introduced to the study circle - a well-tested, practical, and effective method for adult learning and social change. The study circle features informal, face-to-face, sustained small-group discussion of social and political issues. It is small-group democracy in action. Individual members take responsibility for the study circle and ultimately control both the content of the discussions and the group process.

Study circle participants are teachers as well as learners in relation to each other and the discussion leader; they educate each other by sharing ideas and experiences. The study circle emphasizes cooperative learning, democratic participation, respect for individual views, and learning from the collective wisdom of the group.

The study circle is a simple, easy-to-manage method for adult learning that can be easily adapted to different participant and organizational needs, resources, and settings. It is inexpensive and local, taking advantage of indigenous resources and circumstances.

The study circle can enrich organizational and public life in America by bringing participants into active, leadership roles in their organizations and their communities. It can help to translate individual values into collective political action. It can enhance workplace democracy and citizen participation. In the study circle, participants don't just talk about democracy, they practice it: all viewpoints are taken seriously and all participants have an equal opportunity to express their views.

The study circle, as it has worked here and abroad, has a long track record of enhancing individual self-esteem, increasing communication skills, and encouraging self-directed adult learning.

Once triggered, the feelings of power and the capacity to effect change through education can never be reversed.

2. Study Circles: Integrating Life and Learning

Study circle methodology arises out of the fundamental principle that life and learning cannot be separated. As adults, we learn what we want to learn, at our own pace and schedule, to improve our lives and to enable us to cope with problems, choices, and decisions that affect our destiny. Thus, certain principles from adult learning guide all study circle work:

1. Adults learn most effectively when engaged in the subject matter. Think of your own best learning experiences.

2. The best education encourages self-directed learning, not classroom learning dependent on teachers, professors, experts, textbooks, or other authorities.

3. Adult experiences provide the context for learning and are an important part of the educational exchange.

4. Adults seek out education because they have a need for practical, usable knowledge - not because the program is required. They are wrestling with a concern or a problem and need information or understanding to make an informed judgement as to what to do.

5. Adult education must be flexible and accessible if busy people with many responsibilities are to participate.

3. The Significance of the Study Circle Idea: Bringing Citizens Back to Political Life

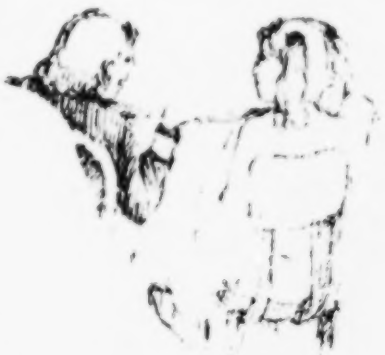
Study circles can be developed on any topic, but the most pressing national need is for American citizens to participate more actively in public affairs. Democracy requires the extension of educational opportunities to all citizens. As our own ideologies about individual liberty and democracy took hold in the late 1700s, so did concern for an educated, informed, and participating populace. Citizen education and participation is necessary to provide political will from the people, to give government legitimacy to act, and to serve as an antidote to autocratic, special-interest, or elitist authority.

Today, however, it is becoming ever more difficult for the public to acquire the information and influence it needs to participate in decision making. Media dominance, slogan-filled and negative campaigns, confrontational politics, the influence of special-interest and single-issue groups, the importance of public opinion polls, and the power of money in politics have led many to conclude that there is something drastically awry in American political life.

In the modern era, knowledge has become more important as issues become more technological and complex. This has increased the power of experts to control policy in spite of the fact that values underlie even the most technical of problems. The role of the citizen is not to challenge experts on technical or administrative details, but to participate in the broader debate about the values and the goals that shape government policy.

The study circle can help meet our society's need for active, informed citizens who can keep policymakers accountable. It helps citizens to develop the capacity for self-government and leadership by helping them to acquire the knowledge and skills to participate actively in public life. It has the potential to help change American political life from a spectator sport into a dynamic process in which citizens work together to decide the destinies of their communities and organizations. Study circles can help to develop what some have called "deliberative democracy."

Deliberative democracy - face-to-face discussion in which citizens consider policy choices in light of their individual values - is never easy. It is time-consuming, often awkward and uncertain, but absolutely necessary. When officials act without public deliberation and input, the results are often disastrous: programs founder and policies meet resistance because they are poorly considered and not in accord with the public's values. Will Rogers once said, "Democracy is just stumbling along to the right decision instead of going straight forward to the wrong one." The alternative to deliberative democracy is democracy unfulfilled, with citizens surrendering to the media, special interests, and politician arrogance.



4. Study Circle Origins

America: Individual Sovereignty and Popular Citizen Education

America, born in a spirit of equality, personal liberty, and individual sovereignty, early nurtured the new idea of an informed and responsible populace. Consensual government worked because citizens and community members were aware and involved.

Throughout our history, we have encouraged an enlightened public, democracy through participation, and broadened decision-making power resting in the consent of the governed. Small-group discussions, where citizens come together as equals, have always been integral to this cherished notion of popular deliberative democracy. From Sam Adams' Committees of Correspondence, to Josiah Holbrook's Lyceums, to the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles of the late 19th century, it has been a way of life in our communities for Americans to come together to discuss common concerns. Cooperative, collective deliberation and action, without the sacrifice of individual values - that's our democratic ideal, but one that needs constant attention and nurturing.

The Swedes Adopt the Study Circle

By the turn of the century, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles could claim 15,000 home study circles across America for group discussion of social, economic, and political issues of the day.

At this time, representatives from Sweden's temperance movement, one of a number of popular movements springing up in the late 1800s, visited the United States (including Chautauqua) and came away impressed with the study circle idea. Coming late to industrialization, Sweden in the early 20th century had an undereducated, rural population, few educational resources, and

extensive emigration. The Chautauqua study circle idea quickly took hold; with the cooperation of local libraries and the sponsorship of such popular organizations as the industrial unions, political parties, the free church, the temperance groups, cooperatives, and the YMCAs, study circles became a widely-accepted, highly popular format for adult education on civic and organizational affairs. The organizations flourished, people attained new educational levels, and new leadership emerged. Over the past 90 years, the study circle has become a way of life in Sweden.

Today, the statistics are staggering. In a country of 6 million adults, there are 320,000 annual study circles attracting 2.9 million participants, leading the late Prime Minister Olof Palme to remark that "Sweden is to a considerable degree a study circle democracy." Sweden has provided a basic model of small-group democracy, adding to our own rich history of people coming together around common concerns.

The Study Circle Comes Home

Whenever we have a crisis of values in America, or when social or political conflict arises, we feel a need to come together and talk with our neighbors, workplace colleagues, and fellow citizens. Witness the Studebaker Forums of the depression-ridden 1930s, Great Books and the American Library Association's American Heritage Project of the 1950s, and the workshops of the civil rights movement followed by the teach-ins of the Vietnam era. We also have examples of small-group programs featuring deliberative democracy at work today.

Since the 1950s, the Foreign Policy Association has conducted its Great Decisions discussion program. Focusing on key issues in U.S. foreign policy, this series of presentations and small group discussions has been going strong for 40 years and has grown to include over 250,000 people annually.

In 1981, the Kettering Foundation founded the National Issues Forums (NIF), a national public issue discussion program now operating in over 1,300 communities and addressing three major issues every fall. In the NIF program, approximately one-third of the local community programs use the study circle format. These include church-sponsored study circles, senior citizen groups, statewide study circle programs for extension homemakers, and local study circles in public libraries.

The Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen International Union adopted the study circle format in 1986 as the basic education program for its 500 union locals. Other organizations - health care professionals, community colleges, businesses, churches and synagogues, civic associations, and community action associations - are showing interest in the idea.

5. Essential Characteristics of Study Circles

We have all participated in some form of small-group activity - task forces, work groups, small discussion groups at large meetings, book clubs, focus groups, affinity groups - whatever the nomenclature. Each form of small-group discussion has a different purpose and methodology. Similarly, the study circle has some distinct characteristics.

Wherever the study circle has been tried, the groups employing this low-cost, flexible format have found great value in their discussions. There are some basic reasons why the study circle holds such a powerful attraction for organizations and communities who are interested in deliberative democracy.

• The study circle has a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 20 participants, including the leader. Fewer than 5 participants provides insufficient viewpoints; more than 20 makes it difficult for everyone to share their views.

• The ideal study circle meets for at least three separate sessions and rarely for more than five or six. A study circle can have as few as two sessions, however, and particularly dedicated groups may continue for more than six sessions.

• The study circle leader is well prepared, either through experience in leading group discussions, formal training, or exposure to written training materials. The leader does not have to be either a teacher or a content expert.

• Although the study circle organizer and leader usually determine the initial content, the members of the group - not organizational leaders - ultimately set the agenda and control the study circle.

• The study circle can meet anywhere convenient - in homes, community centers, churches and synagogues, work places, civic clubs, union halls, corporate board rooms, or wherever a small group can gather.

• Unlike formal classes, the study circle does not include exams, final reports, grades, or other forms of evaluating individual participants. The participants, however, are asked to evaluate the study circle program at its conclusion.

• Everyone has ample opportunity to speak and individual opinions carry equal weight - a characteristic of study circles that should carry over into other organizational and community activities. No person or persons can dominate a study circle without strong leader intervention to assure equality of participation.

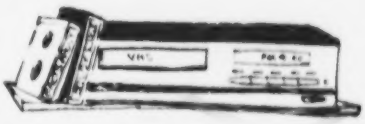
• The study circle enables individuals to speak out and to be listened to. Feelings of self-worth, pride, and stature in groups, organizations, and the community come from being recognized, having one's opinions sought out, and having others listen to one's views.

• Study circles are personal, focusing on life experience and individual beliefs, so no two study circles will ever be alike, even if they are based on the same reading material.

• The study circle leader and participants do not attempt to convert each other, express outcomes through voting, or force a consensus. Pressing social and political issues can be discussed in an atmosphere of collegiality and tolerance. Instead of promoting an interest or a point of view, participants seek common ground. Since no majority vote or consensus is sought, no one has to leave feeling compromised or feeling they have given up something of value.

• The study circle encourages the examination of values as well as of facts, the development of informed judgements as opposed to unconsidered opinion, and the formation of skills crucial to deliberative democracy - active listening and critical thinking and analysis. All participants enjoy the right to criticize and question ideas and value judgements, whatever their source.

• The study circle uses written (and sometimes audio-visual) materials to stimulate discussion, to divide the issue into manageable segments, and



to elicit the collective experience of the participants. These materials explore the spectrum of policy alternatives, enabling the participants to analyze the choices and come to their own conclusions.

6. Who Is Interested In Study Circles

Any organization or community group interested in bringing its members or the public into informal, spirited, and open discussion on pressing social, political, or organizational issues should consider the study circle format. You may want to investigate the study circle format if you are:

a community leader wrestling with a community-wide issue that requires broad citizen input.

a corporate leader who believes in workplace democracy and employee participation through discussions.

a union leader who wants to broaden the union's education program and to obtain views from rank-and-file members.

a public librarian who wants to work with the "Friends of the Library" in creating greater visibility for the library as a community outreach institution.

a minister, priest, or rabbi who is looking for a way to facilitate organized discussion of social and political

issues, bringing in the perspective of your religious tradition or teachings.

a program chair for a local civic association who would like to have members discuss public issues at their regular meetings and would like to see members more involved in public affairs.

a neighborhood activist who is experiencing difficulty with a local issue such as an increase in criminal activity or a decrease in city services.

a community college administrator who wants to involve more members of the community in an adult education program.

a program director at an organization for the physically disabled who is interested in a means to enable members to discuss public issues.

a program planner seeking an informal, participant-centered process for intense group discussions of the main issues your organization or community faces.

Each study circle is shaped by the organization's mission, resources, and program interests and is therefore unique. The diverse study circles that already exist in America demonstrate the potential for study circles to be used in almost any organization.

7. How a Study Circle Works: Content and Process

The study circle, as an informal group directed by participants which meets for the common pursuit of well-planned study of a social or political issue, consists of both content and process. Each enhances the other.

Study Circle Content

Study circle content focuses on an important social and political issue, whether local, regional, national, or international. Study circles work best when the content is important to the participants and when the issue being discussed affects their lives.

International and national issues, valuable topics for study circles in their own right, may also have a local and personal impact. For example, defense expenditures affect our taxes, the federal deficit, and the amount of funds available for other programs; national day care policy is an important concern for parents with young children; and the drug crisis touches most of our lives. State, local, and organizational issues often have an immediately recognizable impact on people's lives, and for that reason are effective topics for study circles.

The reading materials for a study circle can be pre-packaged, like the annual National Issues Forums issue books, or they can be developed for the study circle by the sponsoring organization. A small group or a local study circle organizer can develop their own materials with a few days' work. Materials can be developed for general use, or they can be created specifically for certain types of groups, such as activists or members of a specific profession or trade. Some study circle courses are

internal to an organization, such as the Bricklayers series on the union.

There are many ways to go about building a study circle course. A book, articles, original writing, or a combination of these sources can be the basis for the reading material; audio-visual materials can complement the print materials. The Study Circles Resource Center can help you to develop study circle material that will generate lively discussions. SCRC's publication, "Guidelines for Developing Study Circle Course Material," may be helpful.

Study Circle Process

The study circle process draws its strength from the following elements:

1. The Study Circle Organizer. It is useful to make the distinction between the study circle organizer and the study circle leader, although the organizer and the leader can be the same person. The organizer makes all the logistical arrangements for the study circle, including recruiting the participants and selecting the reading material. The organizer selects the leader and works closely with the leader to make sure that the goals of the study circle are realized. (For detailed information about the roles of the organizer and the leader, you may want to read SCRC's "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle.")

2. The Study Circle Leader. The study circle leader conducts the discussion sessions. Quality of leadership, along with the

contributions of the participants, are the most important factors in the success of a study circle. Even though there are no formal requirements for someone to be a study circle leader, he or she should have the members' respect, be skilled in leading small group discussion, understand the need for fairness and neutrality, and respect the concerns and values of the study circle members. The best leaders are those who identify with the study circle participants.

3. Participants. Along with the leader's skill, the energy and commitment of the participants are critical to the success of a study circle. A study circle belongs to its participants, and their sense of ownership ensures that they will be fully engaged. The strength of a study circle comes from the fact that participants are not just going along with the program, but actually determine the content and direction of the discussions.

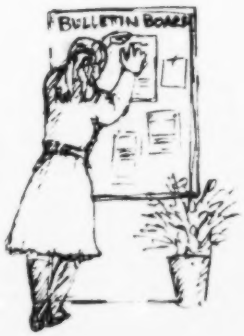
4. Continuity of Sessions. The study circle cannot be a single session; all study circles meet more than once, ideally for three to five sessions. It takes at least one session to become familiar with other participants and to break down interpersonal barriers. Because political issues are often complex, several sessions are necessary to fully explore and analyze the issue and to hear everyone's opinion. Multiple sessions also build group solidarity and strength.

5. Reading Material. Study circle print and audiovisual materials are intended to be catalysts for discussion and thus are

not self-standing. Print materials should be divided into sessions and should be brief and easy to read. They need not be professionally-produced or "the last word" on the subject. Materials should be designed to appeal to personal values, bringing participants directly into the discussions through an identification with their own experiences. They should present choices and trade-offs, while raising key questions to guide the discussions.

8. How You Can Start a Study Circle in Your Organization or Community

You can create a study circle in your organization for your members or constituents, or in your community for the public. First you will need to identify a local or national issue which you believe people will be interested in discussing. Then locate or develop reading material for the discussions. Once you have your study circle course material, you can recruit participants, find a capable leader, and determine the place and times of the meetings.



The Study Circles Resource Center can provide you with detailed written guidelines that explain how to go through these steps. The Clearinghouse can tell you about any pre-packaged written material on your subject that already exists and the staff of the Resource Center is eager to answer your questions and help you to get your study circle program off the ground. Let us know how we can be of assistance.

Appendix A:
Resources Available from the Study Circles Resource Center

Publications of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) include the Public Talk Series (PTS); training material for study circle organizers, leaders, and writers; a quarterly newsletter; a clearinghouse list of study circle material developed by a variety of organizations; and a bibliography on study circles and small-group learning. Public Talk Series programs are available for $2.00 each. All other publications are free of charge.

Public Talk Series

Write for a list of these economical discussion programs on a variety of current issues.

Pamphlets

"An Introduction to Study Circles." 20 pages.

"Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle" covers the mechanics of starting and running a study circle. 32 pages.

"Guidelines for Developing Study Circle Course Material" speaks both to the individual developing material for a single study circle and to large organizations intending to use the material in many study circles. 32 pages.

Resource Briefs (single pages)

"What Is the Study Circles Resource Center?"
"What Is a Study Circle?"
"Organizing a Study Circle"
"Leading a Study Circle"
"The Role of the Participant"
"Developing Study Circle Course Material"
"The Study Circles Resource Center Clearinghouse"

Connections (single pages describing people and programs)

Adult Religious Education
Youth Programs
Study Circle Researchers
Unions

Other Resources

Clearinghouse list of study circle programs
Annotated bibliography

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